

Images courtesy of Pope Productions.
Photo credit: Justin Hall



Gerry Rogers

Left Breast

BY CYNTHIA AMSDEN

much alive and answering questions. The audience's experience centres on the naked exposure of a cancer patient; Rogers' experience, even well after the fact, is the urgency "to tell the truth. I felt absolutely compelled to tell the truth."

No, that makes it sound a little too neutral. At the age of 42, Gerry Rogers was diagnosed with breast cancer in June 1999. She had had a radical mastectomy and post-operative tests showed that her lymph glands were cancerous. This meant six weeks of chemotherapy followed by five weeks of radiation therapy. She agreed to it, reluctantly, spurred on by the wishes of her partner, Peggy Norman, her family and friends. But she had no idea into what toxic chemical night she was going, a particularly disturbing thought given there was no guarantee of a clean bill of health at the end. And it was under those dire conditions that she decided to make this film.

It's one thing for Rogers to explain this documentary impulse as being her way of coping. Filmmaking as therapy and all that new-age goodness of spirit approaches a sincere cliché. But considering that the timbre of making a documentary is not a calming, soul-collecting experience, why did Rogers dial up the pressure in her life by taking on this project?

The inspiration first came to her the night before her surgery. A group of friends had come over for a last supper, BBQ as it were, and part of the way through, Rogers needed some time to think about what she was heading into the next day. "I went upstairs to be alone. I hadn't seen anyone's mastectomy scar before. I wished I'd had a chance to see, to have someone tell me what it would be like." But it wasn't that night she decided to make the film. "It was when I knew I was going to do chemo. This is so new and foreign to me. I've always used the camera to make sense of horrible things. The films I've made about violence against women and violation of women's human rights are how I stop the reality and say, 'just look at this.' And I was, at the same time, constantly looking for stuff that would help me through."

Hailing from down east, Rogers has made a name for herself in documentary filmmaking, particularly via the NFB, although she hasn't courted the feature projects that are registered on the mainstream Internet Movie Database. Her impressive filmography includes producer credits on *Children of War* (1986) and Beverly Shaffer's *To a Safer Place* (1987), and directing credits on *After the Montreal Massacre* (1990) and *Kathleen Shannon: On Film, Feminism and Other Dreams* (1997). These efforts have garnered her more than 20 international awards and distinctions and she was a 1995 recipient of a CTV Fellowship for Banff.

"I had no idea if this was going to be my last film," explains Gerry Rogers about her documentary, *My Left Breast*, for which she was both subject and director. This lack of certainty imbued this mastectomy-chemo-radiation film with a keen sense of mortal desperation edged with creative liberation. At the same time, this single point is brushed aside by viewers because advance press interviews establish Rogers as still very

The sudden loss of control in her personal life was remedied, in part, by the control of making the documentary. At the same time, the foreign feeling of these medical procedures was something Rogers intrinsically felt she wanted to capture on film. Once the decision was made in her mind, Rogers spoke with producer Paul Pope, a man she had worked with on *Extraordinary Visitor* as well as in the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers Co-op. She knew what it would take to direct and produce and didn't believe she'd have the strength to do both. Pope took over the production end and his advice was to "just shoot."

Rogers's pitch was idea driven, which was fortunate because she had nothing else to offer. "I told Paul I had no money." Pope provided her with a VX1000 digital camera. "I said I couldn't do this with a big crew even though I'm used to working with professionals." While many friends in the film community made offers, Pope gave his blessing to having her partner, Peggy Norman, as the primary cinematographer. Norman, a rank amateur whose full-time job is managing the Morgentaler Clinic in St. John's, was pulled into service. "Drafted," is Norman's version of the recruitment, but had she had the option of backing out she wouldn't have taken it. "I'm a techno-peasant, a term Gerry uses that I've adopted as my very own. But I'm mechanically inclined and I know how to work things." Nigel Markham, a professional cinematographer, plus several other volunteers pitched in whenever possible.

Originally, the footage was shot under the auspices of research. "We were taking the traditional point of view that there would be a shoot and this was research," says Rogers. In October 1999, Gerry pitched the idea to Jerry McIntosh, an executive producer from CBC's *Newsworld*, who was in St. John's for the International Women's Film and Video Festival. McIntosh was interested but – rightly so – questioned her sanity. Pope explains, "A few weeks later, we all had a conference call and he gave us money for development."

By the end of 1999, Pope, along with filmmakers Lisa Porter and Roz Power, had cut together a 20- to 30-minute assembly as a sample of the materials to date. "Everyone we showed it to at CBC was incredibly moved and supportive. The material we sent them kept being shown and reshown to other people, and McIntosh put \$65,000 into the project which ultimately came in at \$180,000. We had a delivery deal for October 2000, Breast Cancer month, and CBC wanted to make a meal out of it."

The raw material, 72 hours worth, follows Rogers from the beginning of her chemotherapy through the completion of radiation treatment. The mastectomy, which is the usual focus of first-person breast cancer coverage in any medium, is a given here, revisited only because Rogers felt an overwhelming need to return "to the scene of the crime." The locations are Rogers's home in Carbonear and the hospital. The "cast" varies from medical staff, friends and family, significant other, and alone in front of a mirror facing the camera. The engine is the progress toward a cure, the adaptation to a revised life, and the highest medical sacrilege of assessing doubt.

Medical documentaries, particularly ones that follow a single patient, are so prevalent they are approaching genre status. With breast cancer, there are enough testimonials to the horror of it that the prospect of watching another carries with it some degree of anticipatory depression. But the unilateral reaction after seeing this film is surprise and a giddy emotional catharsis. By going down a checklist of what *My Left Breast* is not – no false sense of hope; no forced heroism; no inner-beauty

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Photo credit: Pauline Stockwood

My Left Breast

sentimentality; no "I'm going to beat this thing" boosterism; no turning surgical scars into art or a thing of survivor beauty or reformatted feminism – it becomes possible to see what it is.

Nothing, absolutely nothing comes between the viewer and Gerry Rogers. The words "love" and "compassion" can be applied, but the integrity of those words has been gutted by Hallmark and pop psychology. The guileless strategy of *My Left Breast* is more delicate. Rogers makes her cancer doable because she questions it and she questions the cure. And speaking doubts out loud, especially alone in the middle of the night, is the one thing cancer patients are not permitted to do. But they do it anyway.

"In terms of the specifics of cancer," Rogers explains, "people know your attitude makes such a difference. You're not allowed to doubt. You have to be positive, be positive, be positive. Thank God I had people in my life who did that for me. Did the chemo help? I don't know. Did the chemo do bad? Yes. Did the radiation help? I don't know. Did the radiation do bad? Yes. But my worry about putting that out there in the film is the women who have to come after me. My biggest concern was that I might be taking hope away from other women."



Intimacy in documentary cinema is the usual quest. In the case of *My Left Breast*, the director as the subject required careful negotiation of the dual-role conflict. Collapsing the barriers meant losing distance and objectivity. Rogers's solution was to breach traditional rules and create her own Chinese wall. "Paul would ask if I was I looking at the material. I told him I was, but I lied. I wouldn't look at anything. The odd time I'd spot check to make sure we had a picture and sound, but I didn't want to start seeing myself as the subject of a film or I'd worry about how I was coming across or how something sounded or how I looked. I knew this was a big risk technically, but I felt if I started doing that, then I would distance myself."

Pope was not born yesterday. "I knew she was lying. Like a rug," he recalls with a chuckle. "It didn't matter. She would send in the footage, and we'd have it logged. Gerry's an established documentary filmmaker, a heart-centred person. Her approach to her material is straightforward. That's what people find refreshing about her work. She handles subjects in a

sensitive and respectful way." The uncertainty of her health, a fact that regularly unnerves cancer patients, was not a point Rogers could focus on as a director because planned outcomes are rarely the luxury of many real-time documentaries. This may have been, in part, one of the ways she reconciled herself to her situation. Adhering to the main tenets of Socratic method, Rogers went from day to day, confessing her revelations to the camera. Confession comes naturally to her. "I grew up in a culture of prayer. I was a nun at one point, and although I'm no longer Catholic, I absolutely adored the confessional. You grow up with the sense of an anthropomorphized deity who is there to hear you. I've dealt with the difficulties in my life by talking them through."

Another strategy to feed the intimacy of the film was to discard the idea of using narration. "Narration is the disembodied voice of authority. The work I've done has always been about making a place for other voices to speak uninterrupted," says Rogers. "To me, it's about someone else's truth as they know it. And this film is the truth as I know it. It's harder to tell the story that way in the editing room, but it's worth it."

The blending of footage from different people behind the camera (more than 50 per cent of the final footage is Norman's) resulted in points in the film where things look a little patchy. Peggy Norman was painfully aware of this. "Things were out of focus and some of that got into the video. It usually was when Gerry was saying something that was really hard and I'm supposed to be focusing and I was just losing it because I couldn't pay attention to the focus and her at the same time."

What Norman saw as lack of skill, Oscar-winning director Terre Nash (*If You Love This Planet*), who did the final edit, saw as a way of giving audiences a textured sense of a real, emotionally involved human behind the camera. It creates, as Nash describes it, "a secondary sense." Nash walked a line between not wanting the film to be too slick (a cinematic anaesthetic, especially with a subject like cancer) or too distracting. The subliminal by-product of watching the camera fuzzi and then focus is that the viewer begins to pull for the camera in the same way audiences at live stand-up comedy root for the comic.

Boiling down the total footage to 56 minutes for airing on Newsworld's *Passionate Eye* (originally it was to be 36 minutes for *Rough Cuts*) was Nash's bailiwick. Rogers waited from April 2000, when her radiation was completed, until June for Nash to come down from Montreal, where she is based. "Terre's a close friend of mine and she cut my film on Kathleen Shannon. She heard I was doing this film but I told her I had no money and she said, 'I'm coming, I'm coming, just give me a place to sleep.'"

The "I'm home alone in Carbonear" scene with Rogers alone in bed after the chemo was finished, was originally 60 minutes long and is one both director and editor speak of in detail. "I had just set up the camera on the tripod, framed it, and hoped that somehow it was going to work," says Rogers. "It was the most difficult scene. It was like a journal but going much deeper," she recalls. Nash goes directly to the heart of it.

"I was riveted by that scene, but I had to cut it down to three-and-a-half minutes and still keep the progression of rhythms and silences. You could have taken the original material, put a title at the beginning and credits at the end, and called it a complete film."

Editing took three months of Nash's time. Given the subject matter, a balance had to be struck between the audience's tolerance level and the director's objective. "There's only so much an audience could take. There's only so much I could take. I was in the cutting room, crying." (Just as a footnote, Nash booked a mammogram as soon as she got back to Montreal.) "Really good documentaries are like dramas. They've got to have the dramatic tension. The footage had all the strings bundled together, and I had to pull them until I had the right tension and then the piece would sing. Some of the strings were silence. You have to respect the silences in a film like this. You have to leave them in," says Nash.

Silence and laughter; Rogers, by her very nature, is not all *gravitas*. She has this birdsong voice and an inclination to laugh that wove its way into the documentary. At times, the humour was deflating as she is laid out on various operating tables, chemotherapy and radiation beds as if in some macabre complement to Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. It's not quite gallows humour, but approaches it at high speeds. And then there is the baby seal segment. If Monty Python had ever tackled the aftermath of breast cancer, this beached seal waiting, *à la* Godot, to be clubbed in the head, would be included. There are lighter moments of cancer comedy, specifically the parody theme song, "Blame It On the Chemo," to which Rogers explains, "I was born on a Godforsaken rock. You've got to laugh."

On the subject of *My Left Breast* being an Oscar contender, the documentary was disqualified because it went to air before the nominations were announced. Instead of *On The*



Waterfront meanderings about what could have been, Pope offers a refreshingly different point of view. "We knew it was good, but we didn't know it was that good. The idea of turning down a lucrative television deal for the slim chance of getting an Oscar nomination seemed pretty silly at the time."

Sometimes, disqualifications bring out the real rewards. At the end of the screening of *My Left Breast* at the 2000 International Woman's Film and Video Festival in St. John's, in front of an audience of 1,000, Terre Nash reached into her bag and pulled out her own Oscar for *If You Love This Planet*. Handing it to Rogers she said, "It was an honour to receive this Oscar, but it's more of an honour to give it away to Gerry for her extraordinary honesty and artistry." Little can be added to a compliment of this magnitude. Currently, Oscar sits on the copper-topped bar at Gerry and Peggy's B&B in Carbonear. He sports a full wardrobe of new dolls clothes because Nash has yet to send along his earlier wardrobe.

This ex-nun once bucked the Church of God. Now she bucks the theology of medicine. There is debate as to whether God is weakened by doubt. Based on the more than 1,800 cassettes of the documentary that have been sold to date ("A landslide for this type of film," says Pope), and the multitudes of messages on the myleftbreast.com Web site, *My Left Breast* establishes that survival of the spirit is strengthened by the admission of it.

TAKE ONE

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